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ABSTRACT

The photographs of Margaret Bourke-White and Lewis Wickes Hine are graphic accounts of the urban industrial United States during the Depression of the 1930s. Hine was a sociologist who initially used his camera to promote social reform and is best remembered for his photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island, New York, and of children laboring in coal mines and textile mills. He later concentrated his photography on Americans on the job, especially when that job meant working with machinery, hoping to depict the true dignity and integrity of labor. Documenting what was good about laborers--their control over themselves and their machines, and the dependence of one laborer upon another--motivated his earlier work. Margaret Bourke-White was more intrigued by architecture and industry, although she photographed a variety of subjects during her career with "Fortune" and "Life" magazines. Bourke-White seemed not to have appreciated or understood the worker's relationship to industrialized society. To her, machines were a series of beautiful patterns to which she attributed human qualities. In her photographs, humans merely served as reference points from which to judge the tremendous size of machines. Her lack of compassion in these early industrial photographs is what clearly distinguishes her work from that of Hine. (HTH)

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AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF THE THIRTIES:

THE INDUSTRIAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF LEWIS WICKES HINE AND MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE

by

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> The depression has made us acutely aware of the fact that our brilliant technological skills are shackled to the shambling gait of an institutional Caliban.
> --Robert Lynd[1]

The tumultuous Thirties have been described in many different ways by many different writers in many different disciplines, and this intensive scrutiny has made this decade in American history seem super-real: a time so talked about, so carefully analyzed, so documented (pictorially), that it nearly ceases to be a part of our experience. In one sense, the Thirties have become a legend, a myth, a symbol for something greater than itself.

For those who did not live through those times (and even for many who did), there are several important sources from which images of that era are drawn. For many, John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, or Horace McCoy's They Shoot Horses, Don't They? or Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon provide a memorable view of life in the Thirties. Of course, images from the Photographic Unit of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) are powerful sources for the vision of the Depression held by many Americans. Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," Arthur Rothstein's "Dust Bowl," and Walker Evan's "Alabama Cabin Washroom" are among the most widely published photographs from that time.

Although these photographs of American life during the Thirties have received and continue to receive acclaim for their straightforwardness and beauty, it must be remembered that the FSA photographers' primary task was to document rural life at that time. The portraits of

America which Lange, Evans, Rothstein, Russell Lee, Ben Shahn, Marion Post Wolcott, John Vachon, Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, and others made during the course of the FSA's seven year existence served many useful purposes; however, these images do not speak to the entire Depression Era. Conspicuously absent from most of the FSA work is an account of urban/industrial America, which can be found in the photographs of Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971) and Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940).

Nevertheless, it was through such efforts as those of the Photographic Unit of the FSA that photography "came of age" during the Thirties. In an attempt to understand American culture, photography became recognized as a tool for documenting the lives and values of the American people. Of course, mass reproduction of photographic images had been technically possible since the halftone process was first employed by the New York Daily Graphic in 1880, but, as with most technological developments, it took time to learn to successfully employ this new tool.

The Thirties saw the evolution of the "talkies," the Big Bands, the fire-side chats of President Roosevelt, radio soap operas, and news-reels. American's growing dependence upon the mass media for knowledge of their lives and the lives of others brought about a new interest in photographic images. Even people who could not read could look at photographs. With the Thirties came a new interest and reliance upon both sight and sound.

Technological developments, such as the Leica ("candid camera") and the Contax, lenses that were faster and interchangeable, and flashbulbs

that were smokeless and silent, made picture-making considerably easier. It is curious that technological developments made it more possible for Americans to document an era trouble by the failures of industrialization and technological achievements. With the help of the radio, films, newspapers, and magazines (illustrated magazines became very popular in the late Thirties), Americans were able to see, hear, and read about the victims of the Machine Age. In other words, machines were being used to report on the effect of other machines upon the quality of American life.

Many Americans of the Thirties now were able to feel themselves a part of others' experiences, to know that many others were adversely affected by the mechanization of industry as well. With so many people out of work, industry and the government came under scrutiny by the public. Articles concerning technology and man and the machine appeared in various middle-class magazines during the Depression,[2] pointing out that industrial production was <u>increasing</u> despite the fact that the number of wage earners was <u>decreasing</u>. As Archibald MacLeish pointed out:

> It became apparent that industrialism was moving toward a degree of mechanization in which fewer and fewer men need be, or indeed could be, employed...the direction of growth of industrialism has changed, our civilization has turned a corner, and the ancient conception of human work as the basis of economic exchange and of the right to live is obsolete, since the work of machines and the conversion of nonhuman energy take the human place.[3]

Despite this great concern with urban industrialization and mechanization, the photographs of the Thirties which address these very

issues usually are not remembered by the public. While the FSA images predominate the popular thinking about the Depression, photographs by Bourke-White and Hine offer an alternative view of the Thirties which warrants attention. Although both Bourke-White and Hine enjoy considerable eminence as great American photographers, their images or steel mills, skyscrapers, dams, bridges, and factories from the Depression Era are not necessarily what they are remembered for most.

It is not the purpose of this paper to speculate why the Bourke-White and Hine images are not as popular as those of the FSA photographers; instead, the issue is why Bourke-White and Hine photographed industry, and how their celebration of America's industrialization differed.

Hine, a native of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, began photographing in 1905 while teaching botany and nature studies at the Ethical Culture School in New York City. Having studied at Oshkosh Normal School, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University (where he received a Pd.M. in 1905), Hine was a sociologist who used his camera to promote social reform. Although best known for his photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island, and children laboring for pennies in coal mines and textile mills, Hine also photographed the activities of the American Red Cross in Europe during World War I, the lighter side of life in Army and Navy camps, and the construction of the Empire State Building in New York City in the early Thirties. Throughout much of his career as a photographer, Hine concentrated on "the man on the job," especially when that job meant working with machinery, such as in coal mines, textile mills, power plants, railroad yards, construction sites, glass

and airplane factories, powerhouses, and on the docks at the waterfront.

For the 35 years Hine was a photographer, his credo was: "There are two things I wanted to do. I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated."[4] His reputation as a Progressive reformer grew out of his images of things that had to be corrected. It was not until he reached middle age that he really concentrated on things that had to be appreciated, including man and machinery.

Hine said he gained an appreciation for the life of the worker while he was still in grammar school and worked long hours in a furniture factory for $4 a week. Before becoming a teacher, he also was employed in a bank and a store. It has been said that Hine "... understood that America is a country where work is the ground of character, the shaper of life."[5] In an age characterized by pessimism and skepticism, Hine was an idealist, an optimist. Although he recognized that working men were often underpaid, exploited, and ill-treated by their employers, Hine felt he had to take "work portraits," as he liked to call them. Taking pictures of the world's nobodies was important to Hine because of the beauty he found in the workers' hands, faces, posture and movements. To Hine, America was its laborers.

After returning from Europe in 1919, Hine documented men on the job. Believing his earlier photographs, especially those done for the National Child Labor Committee, had emphasized only the negative aspects of industrialization, Hine decided to turn his camera on the affirmative aspects of the Machine Age. What resulted was the first significant

book of his work, entitled Men at Work, which first appeared in 1932.

Hine's attitude toward the working man was heavily influenced by the values of the Progressive Movement, a political and social philosophy prevalent in the Teens and Twenties when Hine came of age. Even when he was photographing what he felt "needed to be appreciated," Hine continued in the Progressive mode as a reformer, using his camera to preach to the American public. In this case he now was hoping to depict the "true dignity and integrity of labor."[6] A true believer in the American work ethic and other democratic ideals, Hine seemed sure men could make something of themselves if only they would personally respond to the great challenges of an industrialized society. According to Paul Rayner, "He expected his portraits to arouse the worker to a sense of nobility and the strength of his labors."[7]

Surely the fact that Hine was nearly 50 years old when he began to concentrate on the laborer-as-hero had a profound influence on his work. Hine had worked hard all his life and even as he grew old he clung to his belief in work as the shaper of life. This aging man's attempt to recapture the spirit of an America he had known years before resulted in Men at Work. Originally advertised as a book for children, it was well received by the public, especially by educators and members of social organizations who saw the book as a valuable educational tool. It is clear that the images in this book, the majority of which document the construction of the Empire State Building, were not just meant for children's eyes; these photographs were meant to be a testimonial to the working man--the backbone of America-- for everyone

to see.

Hine clearly stated his intentions in the foreword to the book, which is printed here in full.

> This is a book of Men at Work; men of courage, skill, daring and imagination. Cities do not build themselves, machines cannot make machines, unless in back of them all are the brains and toil of men. We call this the Machine Age. But the more machines we use the more do we need real men to make and direct them.
>
> I have toiled in many industries and associated with thousands of workers. I have brought some of them here to meet you. Some of them are heroes; all of them persons it is a privilege to know. I will take you into the heart of modern industry where machines and skyscrapers are being made, where the character of the men is being put into the motors, the airplanes, the dynamos upon which the life and happiness of millions of us depend.
>
> Then the more you see of modern machines, the more may you, too, respect the men who make them and manipulate them.[8]

It is only fitting that a major portion of this book was devoted to the men who helped build the Empire State Building. At a time when so many people were out of work, the construction of this building employed up to as many as 4,000 men per day, plus thousands of men in building-materials plants and railroad yards. Once the building was completed, approximately 20,000 workers and 40,000 daily visitors were housed in the Empire State Building. This building not only provided jobs and promised jobs, but it also promised to be "...a colossus of modernity...the highest structure ever reared by mankind, fulfilling myriad prophecies on time, space and infinity."[9]

For Hine, documenting what was good about man--his strength, his

control over himself and the machine, and the dependence of one man upon another--motivated this later work just as his belief in correcting social ills had motivated his earlier work.

An alternative look at the Thirties also was offered by Margaret Bourke-White, who is quite a different breed of photographer when compared to Hine. Born in New York City, Bourke-White began photographing as a way of financing her college education. After studying biology and technology at five different universities, she graduated from Cornell University in 1927, and then moved to Cleveland (where her family lived) to begin her career as a professional photographer. In many ways, her career was quite a contrast to that of Hine's.

From the beginning of her professional life, Bourke-White was intrigued by architecture and industry, subjects with which she became acquainted through her father, an engineer-designer. According to her autobiography, as a child she accompanied her father on trips to factories where he supervised the setting up of rotary presses, and she was so impressed that she believed "a foundry represented the beginning and end of all beauty. Later when I became a photographer... this memory was so vivid and so alive that it shaped the whole course of my career."[10]

The two years (1927-1929) that Bourke-White spent photographing the steel mills in Cleveland produced the first examples of her love of industry. Working as a commercial photographer by day and a speculative freelancer by night, Bourke-White was able to sell at least eight prints to a steel industry tycoon at the unheard of price of $100 per print.

These pictures from the steel mills, which Bourke-White believed were at the heart of industry with the most drama, the most beauty,"[11] were published in several mid-western newspapers, interesting publisher Henry Luce in her photographic abilities. After a trip to New York City, Bourke-White decided to join the staff of a new business magazine Luce was planning to publish. As a staff photographer for Fortune, she proved how talented she was, and her skill eventually led to her employment as one of the four photographers on the original staff of Life. Bourke-White's long tenure with Luce's two magazines meant many exciting assignments which took her to the far corners of the world.

Over a 26-year-period she photographed a variety of topics, primarily because she shot what was "in the news" at a given time. Her career as a photojournalist brought assignments which ranged from photographing notables like Stalin, Churchill, and Pope Pius XI, to the American sharecroppers during the Depression (some of her images are mistakenly thought to be part of the FSA project). Bourke-White photographed Nazi death camps at the end of the war, Moscow while it was under Nazi attack, South African diamond and gold mines, and India at the time of Gandhi's assassination. Her life, unlike Hine's, was glamorous and dramatic, dangerous and high-paying. While Hine was struggling to make a living during the Thirties, Bourke-White was a woman on top in a man's world of magazine photography.

The dramatic flare which characterized her professional life also characterized her photographs for Fortune and Life. Her reliance on

unusual camera angles and operatic lighting is the basis for criticism, according to historian William Stott, who thinks she overemotionalized, sentimentalized, overdramatized nearly everything she saw.[12] There is a "larger-than-life" feeling to her work beginning as far back as her images of Cleveland's steel mills from the late 1920s. Her powerful images of industry are studies in contrast--both in terms of their lighting and their content. According to biographer Theodore Brown, Bourke-White

> ...mastered the composition of mutually reinforcing opposites, and there is indication that she was fully conscious of this artistic device when she wrote a few years later that 'contrast...is an essential quality in the making of a great photograph--or any work of art, for that matter.... Contrast lends itself to description graphically more easily than it does with words. Even in its most complex combinations, anyone can understand most photographs.'[13]

Whereas Hine talked about industrialization in terms of man's mastery over the machine, Bourke-White seems not to have appreciated or understood man's relationship to industrialized society. To her, machines were a series of beautiful patterns to which she attributed human qualities. Just how the machines or bridges or mills or dams or storage tanks came to be built apparently did not concern her; instead, she was fascinated by their Gargantuan size and their intricate details. As she said:

> Anything in industry that has to do with progress is vital. Ore boats, bridges, cranes, engines--all are great creatures with steel hearts. They all have an unconscious beauty that is dynamic, because they are designed for a purpose. There is nothing wasted, nothing superficial. The realization of this idea will grow. It reflects the modern spirit of the world.[14]

Human qualities were attributed to machines by Bourke-White. She had little need for real human beings in these images which romanticize industry;

humans served as reference points from which to judge the tremendous size of the machines--people provided the contrast she needed to make her point about the beautiful form and pattern of industry. It is clear that Bourke-White came of age during the 1920s, a decade between the two world wars in which many Americans thought industry was the hope of social salvation. In her autobiography, she made clear her feelings toward men and machines; she admitted a preoccupation with the neo-Bauhaus idea of form and function, while virtually ignoring the role man played in all of this. In discussing the Fortune assignment which sent her to the Midwest to cover the great drought of 1934, Bourke-White acknowledged that it is this work that made her aware of humans as sympathetic subjects for her photographic reports. According to Bourke-White, "During the rapturous period when I was discovering the beauty of industrial shapes, people were only incidental to me, and in retrospect I believe I had not much feeling for them in my earlier work."[15]

Her lack of compassion in these early industrial photographs is what clearly distinguishes her work from that of Hine's. By relying on artificial light, mirrors, unusual camera angles and framing, and vast expanses of space, Bourke-White created modernistic designs out of machinery and smoke stacks, conveying a mood which she hoped all men would see as new, exciting, and inspiring. Hine, on the other hand, relied on a simple, straightforward style to tell his story. In most of his images, the faces of the men he photographed are clearly visible (several images have a snap-shot, family-album quality to them). In cases where the men cannot be easily identified, light falls gently on their muscular arms and backs so as to emphasize each man's power over the machine he was using.

Hine's admiration for the men he photographed is evident in his work.

Although she has been largely praised for her pioneering work, Bourke-White's industrial photographs have infuriated historian Stott. Seeing her as an opportunist, Stott said:

> She portrayed industrial machines not as everyday things men work with but as bright-tongued beasts in black caverns of smoke....And the purpose of these unusual techniques was just to be unusual: to pep up the content, to wheedle the viewer into emotion by making it seem that what he looked at was fresh, subtle, and passionate, and not what it was: a sentimental cliche. Bourke-White wanted--too obviously--to move her audience....[16]

It appears that Hine did not arouse such negative feelings with his photographs of men and machines. While Bourke-White beautified industry, transforming "the American factory into a Gothic cathedral and [g]lorifying] the gears."[17] Hine praised mankind with a directness that some people considered "old-fashioned," because his photographs were not "jazzy" in the way that magazine and newspaper photography of the Thirties had become.[18] Hine, it is said, believed that "if others could see the beauty of the craftsman's work, the economic importance of his existence, and the biological strength of his body, then they would see the new American Man."[19] By presenting his message in an unembellished manner, Hine hoped to counteract the Depression notion of the "marginal man <u>lagre lui</u>."

Bourke-White's concern clearly was with the machine, not mankind. This hard-driven commercial photographer wanted to reveal to the public the power and the beauty of urban-industrial civilization, apparently hoping to

create a renewed faith and pride in technological achievements and the machine. To the unemployed men and women of the Depression, her images of mightly machines and men the size of flies must have been discouraging, for they glorified urbanization and industrialization while virtually ignoring the role man played in this changing society. Hine may have presented Americans with a one-sided view as well, overplaying the control man had over machines and mechanization; however, it must have been more reassuring because Hine erred on the side of his viewers.

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